Veikka Kilpeläinen, *Kaupunki yhteisenä tilana: Kaupunkitilan käyttö kustavilaisen ajan ja autonomian ajan alun Helsingissä 1770–1820* [The town as a shared space: Use of common town space in Helsinki during the Gustavian era and early years of Finnish autonomy 1770–1820] (Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä, 2024). 166 pp.

Juha-Matti Granqvist

In his dissertation, Veikka Kilpeläinen marries two current trends in Finnish urban history research. One is the spatial turn, which, since the turn of the millennium, has drawn interest to public and private spaces, their users, usages and meanings in historical context. The other is the specific history of Helsinki, which has largely been re-written during the past fifteen years.

The introduction ties Kilpeläinen's study to Panu Savolainen's and Riitta Laitinen's research on Turku in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as well as to Tobias Osvald's research on late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Stockholm. All three have analysed the early modern urban public sphere from different angles – Savolainen, with an architect's point of view, focuses on urban geography, while Laitinen and Osvald concentrate on crime and public order.

Kilpeläinen declares that he uses "a broader perspective" than his three predecessors. His research questions are: 1) how and why did people use the common town space and 2) what kind of meanings did they create for the space through their actions? Theoretically, the thesis is anchored to geographer Doreen Massey's argument that the social dimensions of space are born in interactions between people with different interpretations of its use and different opportunities to use it.

The choice to focus on Helsinki is motivated in two ways. Firstly, it is a particularly fruitful case. Up to 1809, it was a lively Swedish port and military town; after

https://doi.org/10.7557/8177

1809, it became the capital of the new Grand Duchy of Finland. This meant lots of conflicting interests when it came to the use of public space. Secondly, there is copiously new research to build on. Thanks to the City of Helsinki's undertaking to re-write the town's history (as we speak, it has proceeded from year 1550 to the 1860s, and the volume covering the late Russian era up to 1917 is underway) and an Academy of Finland research project on the founding and construction of the sea fortress Sveaborg, there are new publications, for both an academic and a broader audience, on late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Helsinki.

When reviewing Panu Savolainen's dissertation for this periodical in 2018, I made the following statement about the spatial method: "As a research tool, it is a double-edged sword: a skilful historian can use it to open new perspectives; in lesser hands, it way too often regresses into stating the obvious with big words." The past seven years have given me no reason to revise my opinion. If Savolainen clearly situates himself at the better end of this scale, how then, does Kilpeläinen perform?

Kilpeläinen's book offers plenty of interesting observations about the use of urban space. I heartly recommend it to anyone interested in the usefulness of spatial methods in early modern urban history, as it maps most of the possibilities of this approach. However, Kilpeläinen's intention to apply a "broader perspective" leaves him unfocused, and this becomes his biggest problem.

The study is structured around the spatial geography of Helsinki from three different perspectives. First, Kilpeläinen studies the way in which the authorities controlled the public space, including building regulations, public order and fire safety. Second, he concentrates on the users of the public space, from burghers and soldiers to visiting peasants and vagrants, and to their interactions in spaces like streets, taverns and the church. Third, he tackles the urban space as a "physical and perceptible environment" and looks at physical borders between the town and the outside world, as well as themes like light, darkness and sounds in the urban environment.

The source material is remarkable. Kilpeläinen draws from four hundred cases of Helsinki's lower town court (*kämnersrätt*), which handled lesser crimes such as petty thefts, rows and fights. Gathering this material has been a herculean labour, especially since the study is largely based on the original session minutes and not the much cleaner – and much shorter – official transcripts sent to the Court of Appeals.

Whereas the dissertation has a good structural and theoretical frame, it is lacking depth in its analytical parts – the bones are all there, but the meat is often missing. Kilpeläinen's *modus operandi* is to describe a type of public space in detail, pull out one or two court cases to illustrate its use, and then move on.

Chapter 4.2.3, which discusses the harbour of Helsinki, might serve as an example. After painting a detailed picture of the harbour milieu, it cites a handful of minor court cases about stolen boats and drunken sailors, and one larger court case in which a limestone boat skipper from Gotland was trialled for punching a dockworker who had demanded more money for unloading cargo and had called the skipper a cheapskate. According to Kilpeläinen, the last-mentioned case demonstrates "how much was going on in the harbour and how many people of different occupations worked there daily". This is a vivid picture of harbour life in the age of sail – but not that much of an analysis of the harbour as a public space.

The problem here, I feel, lies purely in the overtly broad focus, which does not allow the author to delve deep enough into his material. The limited space of a doctoral dissertation (the study covers 125 text pages) simply does not comply with Kilpeläinen's intended all-encompassing analysis. The book has several themes which, were they given more width and depth, could stand as independent studies themselves. One, which has been of particular interest to this reviewer, a fellow early modern urban historian, is the overlapping administrative borders between town and country.

The town proper, separated from the countryside by toll-gates and toll-fences, was circled by the so-called donation land (Sw. *donationsjord*), owned by the town and used by the burghers as fields, pastures and plantations. Kilpeläinen points out that old urban history has neglected the donation land, even though it was economically vital for the urban community – and also a significant public space with its own rules and social customs. The borders between "private" areas, which the burghers used for farming, and "common" areas, where all townspeople could pick berries, mushrooms or herbs, were not always clear. Kilpeläinen makes sharp observations and picks up interesting court cases, but, unfortunately, without giving the topic the number of pages it deserves. It seems like he could have written a good dissertation on this theme alone.

The overall impression is that Kilpeläinen has surveyed a fruitful field of research but left a major part of the possibilities unused. The dissertation does an excellent job in mapping all public spaces, their users and their usages in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Helsinki. Unfortunately, it rather calls for deeper analysis of the subjects it deals with – mostly, as stated above, due to the research questions which could have been narrowed down. One can only hope that this book will become a groundwork for further, deeper case studies on the subject – Kilpeläinen's map shows many treasures buried, and he is the best expert to unearth them.